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Who Shared It?: Deciding What News to Trust on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms are becoming increasingly popular news sources. They differ from traditional media as people are exposed to stories from a variety of people and outlets, including potential fake news stories. This raises a key question: What leads people to trust news on social media? Research indicates two cues that could impact opinions of news on social media: (1) the trustworthiness of the person who shares a story; (2) the credibility of the news outlet reporting the story. This study tests those factors simultaneously with a recent survey experiment of American adults that simulates social media posts by either a trusted or untrusted public figure and directs respondents to an article manipulated to come from either a reputable news source or a fake news source. The findings highlight the impact elites sharing a story has on views toward an article on social media compared with the effects of the news outlet reporting the story. The study has significant implications for researchers, citizens, and publishers trying to understand how people evaluate the trustworthiness of news on social media and the potential impact of fake news.

KEYWORDS

Social media; news source; trust; survey experiment; fake news

Introduction

The ways people receive news and information are rapidly evolving. One significant shift has been the growing use of social media as a news source. Social media is a very different type of source than traditional broadcast or print outlets, and it is unclear how people evaluate the vast amount of news they come across on social media. And while understanding what factors impact people's trust in news has long been important to scholars and the media, it is especially critical amid growing concerns about fake news stories spreading across the internet via social media.

Social media's reach is widespread in the United States and has changed how people receive news. Sites such as Facebook or Twitter are increasingly popular sources of news for the public. A 2017 Media Insight Project study found 75% of Americans say

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The data for the study is available here: http://mediainsight.org/PDFs/Trust%20Social%20Media%20Experiments%202017/Trust%20Experiments%202017%20PUF.zip
This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

they receive news on social media and that social media is a prominent news source across ages, income levels, races, and ethnicities (The Media Insight Project 2017a). Scrolling through a Facebook or Twitter feed differs in many ways from subscribing to a newspaper or turning on a television newscast. On social media, people often see news via posts and comments from public figures and celebrities alongside those from friends, family, and acquaintances. People often are exposed to a wide variety of stories and news sources, and may see a mix of familiar and unfamiliar sources. In addition, there are often not clear divisions distinguishing different kinds of content on social platforms, such as news, political advocacy, entertainment, or advertising. This new information landscape raises an important research question: What factors impact people's trust and evaluation of news stories on social media?

This question is important for scholars, the media, and the broader public. Trust in the media has been declining in recent years (The Media Insight Project 2016) while social media provides the public easier access to more sources of information. Research shows that how individuals evaluate particular sources or stories impacts how the information in those stories influences their attitudes and behaviors (see Wilson and Sherrell 1993; Pornpitakpan 2004, for reviews). As a result, understanding what factors lead people to trust news on social media can provide insights into how news on social media can shape public opinion and suggest strategies for reducing the spread of false information.

In order to explore this question and build upon past research, this study features a nationally representative survey with an experimental design to simultaneously test how two key aspects of news on social media impact people's perceptions of the story: (1) the person sharing the story, and (2) the media outlet reporting it. The research also examines if other key factors moderate the effects of the sharer or news source on attitudes toward news on social media. The study findings have important implications for understanding how people assess news on social media and how such information impacts public knowledge and opinion.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Public trust in the media has declined in recent years, and is relatively low when compared to other American institutions such as the military (The Media Insight Project 2016). For example, only 17% say they trust the media a lot (The Media Insight Project 2017b). At the same time, majorities of Americans report reading, hearing, or seeing news multiple times a day across a wide array of news sources and devices/platforms (The Media Insight Project 2017a).

Trust in news is important because it impacts what people pay attention to in the media landscape and how they engage with news. People tend to rely on stories or sources they trust or view as credible (Chaffee and McLeod 1973; Johnson and Kaye 2000; Knobloch et al. 2003; Tsfati and Cappella 2003). Levels of trust can affect how people receive and interpret news (Tsfati 2003). Likewise, those who trust news are more likely to pay for news and more likely to engage with the news in ways such as sharing the information with others (The Media Insight Project 2016).

Trust in news is a concept often linked to media credibility and encompasses a variety of different factors. It often involves a combination of trust in a set of facts, a

journalist, a news organization, or a news medium (Kohring and Matthes 2007; Golan 2010; Williams 2012; Coleman et al. 2012). It can also relate to trust in the journalistic method and the journalistic system as a whole (Blöbaum 2014). In a digital environment, the design and appearance of the website rather than the source attributed to the site can also impact credibility (Flanagin and Metzger 2007; Dochterman and Stamp 2010). Since the concept of "trust" can mean different things to different people and is often not precisely defined by researchers (Metzger et al. 2003; Fisher 2016), scholars have developed multidimensional scales to assess media credibility that include factors such as accuracy, completeness, fairness, bias, and trustworthiness (Gaziano and McGrath 1986; Meyer 1988; West 1994; Flanagin and Metzger 2000; Metzger 2007; The Media Insight Project 2016).

While trust in news is a multidimensional concept, many people rely on cues or heuristics when assessing a news story. Scholars have identified that people use different approaches to process information in different contexts and situations. For example, at times people are highly engaged with information and carefully process the information, while at other times they are less attentive and use shortcuts. Such dual processing strategies have been outlined in models such as the Heuristic-Systematic Model or Elaboration Likelihood Model (Chaiken 1980; Petty and Cacioppo 1986; see Evans 2008, for a review).

When evaluating information online, many people use heuristics and cues (Fogg 2003; Sillence et al. 2007; Sundar 2008; Hilligoss and Rieh 2008; Metzger et al. 2010; Metzger and Flanagin 2013; Go et al. 2014; Metzger and Flanagin 2015; Kang et al. 2011). Previous studies suggest that two cues people are likely to use when evaluating news on social media are: (1) who shares the information and (2) the original reporting source of the story. These potential cues are the basis for this study's two hypotheses that are tested simultaneously, and the experimental design allows for the exploration of several additional research questions related to how various factors impact trust and engagement with news on social media.

First, research has long shown that "opinion leaders" shape people's attitudes (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Katz 1957; Weimann and Brosius 1994; see Nisbet and Kotcher, 2009). People often seek out information from those they trust or expect to have similar beliefs as them (Huckfeldt et al. 1995), and they tend to have more trust in information online when it is shared by an opinion leader (Metzger et al. 2010; Messing and Westwood 2014; Ma et al. 2014 Turcotte et al. 2015). Elite influence can operate through the two-step flow model where information and ideas flow first from mass media to opinion leaders, then from opinion leaders to the general public (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Brosius and Weimann 1996). In the fragmented online media environment, elite opinion leaders can operate within the two-step flow model by taking information created by mass media and sharing it with their followers on social media (Velasquez 2012; Choi 2015). These findings provide the basis for *Hypothesis 1(H1)*.

> *(H1):* People are more likely to trust and engage with a story on social media if it is shared by a public figure they trust than if it is shared by one they don't trust, regardless of the news source.

Second, the literature highlights the impact of a source's trustworthiness on persuasion and information evaluation (see Wilson & Sherrell 1993; Pornpitakpan 2004, for

reviews). Prior studies use several approaches to demonstrate how people use the news source as a cue for evaluating a news story online (Greer 2003; Sundar et al. 2007; Go et al. 2014; Tandoc 2019). Metzger et al. (2010) report that "one of the most prevalent heuristics used for evaluating credibility that was mentioned by focus group participants was relying on site or source reputation." Likewise, an experiment presenting a story as coming from either *The New Yorker* or *BuzzFeed* illustrates that the source impacts people's impressions of an article (Funt et al. 2016). Research also shows the news source is a potential cue on social media (Lee and Sundar 2013). Moreover, a 2016 survey shows that people are more likely to explicitly say the news source has a significant impact on their views toward news on social media than the person sharing the story (The Media Insight Project 2016). These findings provide the basis for *Hypothesis 2(H2)*.

> *(H2):* People are more likely to trust and engage with a story on social media if it comes from a reputable news source than if it comes from a fake news source meant to appear like a real, reputable news source, regardless of the sharer.

In a digital news environment, traditional conceptions of trust that rely on clear distinctions between source, message, and medium may be inadequate (Metzger et al. 2003; Sundar 2015) and being able assess the effects of each is critical. This study attempts to build upon such research by exploring how the interplay between the sharer of news and the news reporting source impact trust in news on social media. The experimental design simultaneously tests the impact on trust of both the sharer and the reporting source and allows for a test of *Research Question 1 (RQ1)* and *Research Question 2 (RQ2):*

> *(RQ1):* What has a greater impact on trust and engagement with a news article, the level of trust in the public figure who shares the article, or whether the article is attributed to a reputable news source or a fake news source?

> *(RQ2):* Do the effects of the sharer and news reporting source interact with each other?

Finally, research indicates that the impact of cues can vary depending on the information context. In particular, the effects of cues such as the sharer or source could vary depending people's interest or involvement in the topic and familiarity with social media. The Prominence-Interpretation Theory of how people assess the credibility of websites identifies five factors that impact the likelihood that people notice certain elements of a website: (1) topic; (2) user motivation; (3) task of user; (4) experience with web conventions; and (5) user literacy, cognition, and learning style (Fogg 2003). Topic salience can lead to greater interest and engagement with a story and mitigate the impact of cues (Fogg 2003; Ciuk and Yost 2016). At the same time, involvement in a topic could lead people to be more aware of source cues (Kang et al. 2011). Familiarity with any news medium or format, such as getting news on social media, could increase the likelihood people would use cues such as the sharer or source (Tversky and Kahneman 1975; Johnson and Kaye 2014; Hocevar et al. 2014). These findings provide the basis for *Research Question 3 (RQ3)*:

> *(RQ3):* Are the effects of either the sharer or the source on trust and engagement moderated by topic salience or typically getting news on social media?

Data and Methods

The data for this study come from a survey experiment conducted from 9 November to 6 December 2016 that featured completed interviews with 1489 adults, including oversamples of African Americans and Hispanics. Data were collected online using the AmeriSpeak® Panel, NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U. S. households were sampled with a known, nonzero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by U.S. mail, telephone, and field interviewers. The survey had a completion rate of 34.8% and a cumulative AAPOR response rate 3 of 10.8%. The overall margin of sampling error is ±3.5% percentage points at the 95% confidence level, including the design effect.

During the survey, respondents were presented with a news feed item closely resembling what they might see on Facebook (see Appendix). All participants saw the same news content, but the person who shared the story and the original reporting source were both randomly varied. After reading the post and the story, participants answered a series of questions about the story and their trust in the information.

The simulated Facebook post featured a health story about the risk of Type 2 diabetes. Each respondent saw the post from one of eight public figures who might share information about health: Oprah Winfrey, Jillian Michaels, Lester Holt, Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, Dr. Sanjay Gupta, Dr. Oz, Gwyneth Paltrow, or Kayla Itsines. We chose a diverse set of public figures to ensure that respondents would be familiar with at least several of these people and there would be variation in trust in these people (i.e., they would trust some more than others). Earlier in the survey,[1] respondents evaluated the trustworthiness of each of the eight figures on a four-point scale ranging from very untrustworthy to very trustworthy. Respondents also had the option to say they were not familiar with the person. Half of people were randomly assigned to see the post from a public figure they had identified as trustworthy and the other half were assigned to see the post from a person they had said was untrustworthy. The post from the public figure said "Check this out…" and respondents could see the headline of the health care article: "Don't let the scale fool you: Why you could still be at risk for diabetes." We chose a topic not associated with strong ideological and political positions because the content of a story can impact people's trust in an article, especially when it reinforces or contradicts strongly held beliefs. This article was originally written by a University of Florida professor and was distributed on The Associated Press (AP) news service. The article appeared on many news websites including AP's own site, which was depicted in the simulated post. However, the byline was changed to a fictitious name to avoid the potential that recognition of the author could impact attitudes. Respondents were shown just the first five paragraphs due to time and space considerations. We chose an article about health because it is a topic that people often share news about on social media and it is a topic in which trust in the information is important.

After clicking on the post, respondents all saw the same health article. However, half of the people were randomly assigned to see the article labeled as coming from

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for those respondents used in the analysis (percent of each group).

	Sharer		Source		
	Trust	Not trust	AP (Trusted)	Fictional	Total
Age					
18–24	18	20	18	20	19
30–44	29	30	25	32	29
45–59	29	24	27	27	27
60 plus	24	26	30	22	25
Gender					
Female	54	49	53	51	51
Male	46	51	47	49	49
Education					
No HS diploma	6	5	6	6	6
HS grad	29	28	26	31	29
Some college	32	30	31	32	31
BA or above	32	36	38	31	34
Income					
Less than $35,000	37	31	35	35	35
$35,000–$74,999	30	33	32	31	31
$75,000 or more	33	35	33	35	34
Race and Ethnicity					
White	41	53	44	48	46
African American	31	17	26	25	25
Hispanic	24	25	26	23	25
Other race	3	5	5	3	4
Party Identification					
Democrat	60	55	64	55	58
Republican	14	14	13	15	14
Other	25	30	23	30	27
N	653	469	434	688	1,122

the AP, one of the largest and well-known news agencies, and the other half were assigned to see the article labeled as coming from the DailyNewsReview.com, a fictional news source. In both conditions, the name of the news agency was prominently displayed at the top of the article and visible in the simulated Facebook post. Similar to the pre-experiment assessment of the public figures, all respondents were asked earlier in the survey about their trust in The Associated Press as a part of a series of questions that also asked about their trust in The New York Times, CBS News, and Buzzfeed. While the DailyNewsReview.com is not a real news agency, the web page was designed to appear as if it were a real and reputable news source, which is how a fake news website often appears to a person who encounters one outside a survey experiment environment.

The experimental design simultaneously tested two manipulations: (1) the sharer of the post (a trusted or untrusted elite sharer) and (2) the news source (the AP or a fictional source). Table 1 illustrates the demographic distribution of the sample used in the analysis.[2,3,4]

The experimental manipulation enhances the internal validity (reliability) of the results as previous research shows people often fail to accurately report their perceptions of news on social media (Metzger 2007; Vraga, Bode, and Troller-Renfree 2016). The use of a large, representative sample enhances the external validity (generalizability) of the results and provides further empirical support for concepts explored previously with more qualitative approaches.

Measures

Key Dependent Variables

After reading the story from the social media post, respondents were asked about implicit measures of trust in the story as well as possible engagement with it.

Trust

Respondents were asked how well four statements described the article in order to assess how much they trusted the information. The statements were: "It got the facts right," "It provided diverse points of view," "It was easy to find the important information," and "The information seemed well reported and trustworthy." Previous studies have found concepts such as accuracy, unbiasedness, accessibility, and trustworthiness are associated with trusting news, and we modified the older scales to make them more applicable to respondents assessing news on social media (Meyer 1988; Flanagin and Metzger 2000; The Media Insight Project 2016). For each question, the response options were: Extremely well (coded 5), very well (coded 4), moderately well (coded 3), not very well (coded 2), and not well at all (coded 1). The four variables were averaged together to create a trust scale ranging from 1 to 5. The scale has a median of 3.33, a mean of 3.38, and a standard deviation of 0.84. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of the scale is 0.89 and the eigenvalue is 2.6.

Engagement

After seeing the social media post and article, respondents were asked if they would engage with the article, source, or sharer in several ways. The engagement items are designed to capture the range of ways people can interact with news on social media. Respondents were asked to say whether or not they would "Share this article with friends, family, or coworkers," "Sign up for news alerts from [The Associated Press/DailyNewsReview.com]," "Follow [The Associated Press/DailyNewsReview.com] on social media," "Recommend [The Associated Press/DailyNewsReview.com] to friends, family or coworkers," and "Follow [the person who shared the article]." Engagement with news is closely associated to trust as previous research shows people are more likely to engage with news they find trustworthy and trust news sources they frequently use (The Media Insight Project 2016). For each item, those who said yes are coded 1 and those who said no are coded 0. The five items were averaged together to create an engagement scale that ranges from 0 to 1. The scale has a median of 0.20, a mean of 0.25, and a standard deviation of 0.32. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of the scale is 0.79 and the eigenvalue is 2.20.

Experimental Independent Variables

Sharer

Before the experiment, respondents were shown a list of eight public figures and asked, "When it comes to talking about news and information about health and well-being, how trustworthy do you find each of the following people? They then rated them on a scale that included responses of "Very trustworthy," "Somewhat

trustworthy," "Somewhat untrustworthy," and "Very untrustworthy," with the option to say "I am not familiar with this person." Respondents were randomly assigned to see the post from either a person they said was very or somewhat trustworthy or a person they said was very or somewhat untrustworthy. The variable is coded 1 if the respondent saw the post from a person they said they trusted and coded 0 for respondents who saw the post from a person they did not trust.

Source

Before the experiment, respondents were asked to rate how trustworthy they found the AP in a question that read, "When it comes to reporting news and information about health and well-being, how trustworthy do you find The Associated Press … Very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, somewhat untrustworthy, very untrustworthy, or I am not familiar with this source?" Respondents were asked the same question in regards to The New York Times, CBS News, and Buzzfeed in order to reduce the potential for priming effects. Respondents were later randomly assigned to see the story as coming from either The Associated Press, or DailyNewsReview.com, a fictional news outlet. Respondents who received the AP article but said either the AP was untrustworthy or unfamiliar were excluded from the analysis to ensure the source variable is comparing an unknown source to a source that respondents trust. This variable is coded 1 for those who saw the article coming from the AP and trusted it and is coded 0 for those who saw that article coming from the fictional news outlet.

Manipulation Checks

After being asked about implicit measures of trust in the story and engagement with the article, respondents were asked explicit questions about how the sharer and source impacted their trust in the story. These questions serve as manipulation checks to confirm that people are more likely to say a trusted sharer (compared to a distrusted sharer) and reputable news source (compared to a fictitious source) increase their trust in the information.

Impact of Sharer on Trust

Respondents were asked, "When you saw [name of person sharing the article] shared the article, did that make you … Much more likely to trust the information, somewhat more likely to trust the information, neither more nor less likely to trust the information, somewhat less likely to trust the information, or much less likely to trust the information." The answers were coded from 1 (much less likely to trust the information) to 5 (much more likely to trust the information).

Impact of Source on Trust

Respondents were asked, "When you saw [The Associated Press/DailyNewsReview.com] published the article, did that make you … Much more likely to trust the information, somewhat more likely to trust the information, neither more nor less likely to trust the information, somewhat less likely to trust the information, or much less likely to trust

the information." The answers were coded from 1 (much less likely to trust the information) to 5 (much more likely to trust the information).

Potential Moderating Variables

Interest in topic

Respondents were asked to say how interested they were several topics including health and well-being, which was the topic of the article they were shown in the experiment. The responses were "Extremely interested" (coded as 5), "Very interested" (coded as 4), "Moderately interested" (coded as 3), "Only a little interested" (coded as 2), and "Not at all interested" (coded as 1).

Typically get news on social media

Respondents were asked whether they get news on social media in a typical week. Those who said they did get news on social media are coded as 1 and those who said they did not are coded as 0.

Control Variables

Age

Coded as a continuous variable.

Education

Coded as an ordinal variable ranging from 1 for having no formal education to 14 for having a professional or doctorate degree.

Income

Coded as an ordinal variable ranging 1 for household income of less than $5000 a year to 18 for household income of $200,000 or more.

Gender

Coded 0 for male and 1 for female.

Race and Ethnicity

Respondents were categorized as non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, or other. Dummy variables were used for non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, and other with non-Hispanic white as the reference group.

Political Partisanship

Dummy variables were used for Democrat, Republican, and independent, with Democrat as the reference group.

Analysis

The analysis tests the impact of the two experimental treatments on attitudes toward the news story and explores several potential factors that could moderate these effects.[5] First, we run one-way ANCOVAs to assess the source and sharer manipulation checks. Then, we run a MANCOVA for our two-dependent variables, trust and engagement, which allow us to test the effect on both of these variables at once. The MANCOVA accounts for the high degree of correlation between these variables. Follow-up ANCOVAs on each dependent variable were conducted with a Bonferroni-corrected significance level of $\alpha = 0.025$ to allow for an analysis of direct effects not possible through the MANCOVA. The model features the two key experimental variables: trust/no trust in the elite sharer and the AP/fictitious news outlet as the source. The models also include the variables related to respondents' interest in health news and whether respondents typically get news on social media, as well as controls for age, gender, income, education, race and ethnicity, and political partisanship. After examining the direct effects of the sharer and source, we explore the potential interaction between sharer and source. Lastly, we explore whether interest in health news or typically getting news on social media moderate the effects of either the sharer or source by running separate models for each of the following four interactions: interest in topic × sharer, interest in topic × source, typically get news on social media × sharer, and typically get news on social media × source. All analyses were conducted in Stata.

Results

The findings illustrate that the sharer (*H1*) greatly impacts both trust and engagement with news on social media, while the reporting source significantly affects only engagement (*H2*). The sharer has a much larger and more consistent impact than the source on trust and engagement *(RQ1)*, and the sharer and the source do not interact to impact trust or engagement *(RQ2)*. Neither topic salience nor familiarity with getting news on social media moderate the effects of either the sharer or source *(RQ3)*.

The manipulation checks confirm the efficacy of both experimental treatments. In a one-way ANCOVA, the effect of the public figure sharing the story on explicit trust in the article is highly significant $F(1, 1073) = 329.59$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.23$ and illustrates that a trusted elite increases the likelihood people say they trust the story. Likewise, the effect of the source reporting the story on trust in the article $F(1, 956) = 146.76$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.13$ is significant in the one-way ANCOVA and shows a reputable source increases the chance people say they find the article trustworthy compared with a fake news source.

The MANCOVA results strongly confirm (*H1*) that people will be more likely to trust a story and engage with it if it is shared by a trusted public figure than if it is shared by a public figure they don't trust (see Table 2).[6] The trust in sharer variable has a significant multivariate main effect on the two-dependent variables taken together, Wilks' λ $F(2, 1009) = 20.61$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.04$. The effect of the sharer on the mean value of trust is 2.6 times greater than the effect of the source and 1.5 times greater than the source for the mean value of engagement *(RQ1)* (see Table 3). Subsequent

Table 2. MANCOVA main model results.

Variable	df1	df2	*F*	Partial η^2
Sharer	2	1009	20.61***	0.04
Source	2	1009	5.62**	0.01
Get news on social	2	1009	12.32***	0.02
Interest in topic	8	2018	5.18***	0.02
Age	138	2018	1.06	0.07
Female	2	1009	4.26*	0.01
Education	24	2018	2.25***	0.03
Income	34	2018	0.99	0.02
African American	2	1009	24.74***	0.05
Hispanic	2	1009	10.52***	0.02
Other race	2	1009	3.62*	0.01
Republican	2	1009	1.87	<0.01
Independent	2	1009	9.14***	0.02
N	1122			

Note. ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; $^{+}p < 0.10$.

Table 3. Mean implicit trust and engagement.

	Implicit trust			Engagement		
Dependent variable	*M*	*SE*	*n*	*M*	*SE*	*n*
Sharer						
Trusted Sharer	3.41***	0.03	653	0.29***	0.01	653
Untrusted Sharer	3.12	0.04	469	0.20	0.01	469
Source						
AP	3.35*	0.04	434	0.29**	0.01	434
Fictional Source	3.24	0.03	688	0.23	0.01	688
Interest in health						
Not at all interested	3.19	0.20	16	0.13*	0.08	16
Only a little interested	3.03	0.08	90	0.17	0.08	90
Moderately interested	3.17	0.04	357	0.21	0.08	357
Very interested	3.35	0.04	397	0.27	0.08	397
Extremely interested	3.46	0.05	262	0.32	0.08	262
Gets news on social media						
Yes	3.32^{+}	0.03	344	0.28***	0.01	344
No	3.22	0.04	778	0.18	0.02	778

Note. Significance of highest versus lowest level: ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; $^{+}p < 0.10$.

ANCOVAs confirm significant positive effects of the sharer on both trust and engagement (see Table 4).

The findings offer mixed evidence of (*H2*) that people will be more likely to trust and engage with a story if it comes from a reputable news source than if it comes from a fake news source (see Table 2).[7] The multivariate main effect of the source is significant on the two-dependent variables of trust and engagement, Wilks' λ $F(2, 1009)=5.62$ $p = 0.01$, partial $\eta^2=0.01$. However, the follow-up ANCOVA analyses demonstrate that source does not impact trust, but has a positive effect on engagement (see Table 4). Additionally, the effect of the source on the mean values of trust and engagement is much smaller than the sharer and several of the control variables *(RQ1)* (see Table 3).

Interest in the topic also has a direct multivariate effect on the trust and engagement together, Wilks' λ $F(8, 2018)=5.18$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 =0.02$, which is confirmed by individual ANCOVAs for implicit trust and engagement (see Tables 2 and 4). Likewise, typically getting news on social media has a multivariate effect on trust and engagement together, Wilks' λ $F(2, 1009)=12.32$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 =0.02$, but the

Table 4. ANCOVA results on trust and engagement.

	Trust		Engagement	
Variable	Partial η^2	F	Partial η^2	F
Sharer	0.03	34.28***	0.02	23.02***
Source	<0.01	4.47*	0.01	10.5**
Get news on social	<0.01	3.1^{+}	0.02	24.59***
Interest in topic	0.03	7.4***	0.03	6.98***
Age	0.08	1.29^{+}	0.06	0.9
Female	<0.01	0.14	0.01	7.83**
Education	0.03	2.92***	0.02	1.9*
Income	0.03	1.63^{+}	0.01	0.4
African American	0.03	30.84***	0.04	38.55***
Hispanic	0.02	15.39***	0.01	14.23***
Other race	0.01	5.45*	<0.01	4.74*
Republican	<0.01	1.41	<0.01	3.54^{+}
Independent	0.02	18.27***	<0.01	2.53
N	1122		1122	
Adjusted R^2	0.18		0.20	

Note. $^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{+}p < 0.10$

Table 5. MANCOVA interaction results.

Interaction	df1	df2	F	Partial η^2
Sharer × Source	2	1008	0.15	0.00
Interest in topic × Sharer	8	2010	1.41	0.01
Interest in topic × Source	8	2010	1.05	<0.01
Typically get news on social media × Sharer	2	1008	1.32	<0.01
Typically get news on social media × Source	2	1008	0.43	<0.01

Note. $^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{+}p < 0.10$.

follow-up ANCOVAs show a positive effect of familiarity consuming news on social media for engagement only (see Tables 2 and 4). In terms of magnitude, the effects of interest in topic and typically getting news on social media are smaller than the effects of trust in the sharer but larger than the effects of the news source (see Table 3).

Regarding *(RQ2)*, there is no evidence that the sharer and the source interact to affect either trust or engagement with the story (see Table 5). The combination of receiving the post from a trusted sharer and reputable news source does not have a significant multivariate effect, Wilks' λ $F(2, 1008)=0.15$, ns, partial η^2 <0.01, beyond the direct effects of each variable.

Lastly, we find no evidence that topic salience or typically getting news on social media moderates the effects of the sharer or the source on engagement with the article or implicit trust *(RQ3)* (see Table 5). MANCOVA results for all interactions tested are not significant.

Discussion

With the rise of social media, news consumers often see news filtered through others who share the content rather than going directly to the reporting source. This has led to concerns about misinformation infiltrating these networks and spreading across the public sphere. Given this less structured and more participatory information environment, what can we say about people's trust in news on social media?

Our results strongly confirm *Hypothesis 1* as people are more likely to trust an article on social media if it is shared by a public figure they trust than by one they do not trust. They are also more likely with a trusted public figure sharing news to say they would engage with the article in ways like sharing it or recommending the source to friends or family.

However, the findings offer limited support for *Hypothesis* 2. There is no significant difference in trust in an article coming from a fictional news source versus a trustworthy one. Trust in a source has an effect on willingness to engage with the article, but the effect is smaller than those of other factors such as the sharer. These result are unexpected in light of past research showing the significant impact of source cues (Metzger et al. 2010; Lee and Sundar 2013; The Media Insight Project 2016). The findings indicate that if people do not know a source, they approach its information similarly to how they would a source they know and trust.

The experimental design also explores the interplay between the news sharer and the news reporting source, and the results show the sharer has a much stronger and more consistent impact on trust in news on social media *(RQ1)*. There is no evidence that the sharer and the source interact to affect trust or engagement with an article *(RQ2)*. In addition, neither interest in the topic of the article nor typically getting news on social media moderates the impact of the sharer or the source on either engagement or trust *(RQ3)*. However, both interest in the topic and familiarity with news on social media have significant direct effects on trust and engagement with news. Therefore, future research would benefit from accounting for these factors when assessing the credibility of news on social media and should explore additional variables such as how closely people follow the topic and/or their knowledge of it. In addition, future studies could examine how individuals' motivations and gratifications, such as information-seeking or status-seeking, impact sharing behavior under experimental conditions (Lee and Ma 2012; Tandoc 2019).

Overall, the findings illustrate the significant role elites can have on trust in news on social media. Previous research shows that trust in information people find online increases when it comes from an opinion leader like those used in this study (Metzger et al. 2010; Messing and Westwood 2014; Ma et al. 2014; Turcotte et al. 2015). The fictional source used in this experiment is designed to look like the website of a real and reputable news outlet. Absent any obvious clues that the source was fictitious, having a trusted public figure share the source may make up for the fact that the respondent had no experience with the source prior to the survey. The results suggest that information passed along from a trusted public figure from a unfamiliar news site is likely to prompt further engagement.

The study design bolsters the reliability and generalizability of the findings. The experimental manipulation boosts the reliability (internal validity) of comparisons between trusted/distrusted sharers as well as a trusted source/fictional news source because everyone was shown identical stories and questions, with only the specific experimental conditions varying. The nationally representative sample enhances generalizability (external validity), as the group of participants reflects the U.S. adult population, and the large sample size allows for quantitative analysis.

However, there are limitations with any experimental design as it is very difficult to perfectly reflect the ways people may encounter news on social media. In this survey, respondents saw an isolated post from a public figure while people encounter news on social media within a feed filled with other news, comments by their friends, and pictures of their family. It often comes from people or news outlets they have chosen to follow on that platform and the effects of news shared by family, friends, or acquaintances could differ from the impact of news shared by elites. In addition, a more complex social media feed could affect the amount and type of attention paid to who shared the article and the article itself. On the one hand, each individual post may blend in more on a typical news feed since there are more posts. On the other hand, people may go to their social media feeds specifically looking for news, and maybe even from a specific poster or source, or on a specific topic, and that could lead to greater attention in a real-life condition compared to the survey design. Additionally, this survey looked at a simulated Facebook post, and results could differ with other social media platforms where people get news. Moreover, there are other potential heuristics that could impact people's trust in news on social media such as endorsement and consistency (Metzger and Flanagin, 2013; Messing and Westwood, 2014), and these factors could interact with either the source or sharer. These are a few of the limiting factors with this research, all of which would be worthy of further study.

Despite these limitations, this study provides evidence as to how misinformation can spread across social media. People's trust in the news they see on social media is strongly related to who shares it, and even if it comes from an unknown outlet, they are willing to pass it along to others if it comes from a person they trust. This study only looks at public figures who share information, and one could imagine the effect being stronger still for sharers a person knows personally. People recognize that they should trust a known source more than an unknown one; after all, with the manipulation check, they were more likely to explicitly say that The AP made them more likely to trust the information in the article compared to the fictional source. Most past studies showing the importance of the source have relied on similar explicit measures of trust that directly ask people about how the source impacts their trust. In contrast, this study's finding that the source had little effect on people's trust relative to the sharer is likely due to the use of multidimensional implicit measures of trust that examine people's attitudes toward a variety of aspects of a story as well their potential engagement with it.

The lack of difference between the effects of a credible source and an unknown source on trust in news once accounting for who shares it has significant implications for trying to reduce the impact of fake news stories. These results present a variety of challenges for the public, social media platforms, scholars, and news organizations. For citizens trying to stay informed, these findings suggest they are vulnerable to fake news to an extent they themselves may not even realize. They may consciously think to check the source that reports the news, but they may implicitly accept or reject that information based on other factors entirely, such as the person who shared it. Such factors may not be at all predictive of the accuracy of the information. Additionally, even the best-intentioned users may be prone to passing along fake

news to the rest of their network, especially if it is shared by a public figure they trust. Social media platforms may need to consider how they can design their platforms to discourage sharing fake news and help their users distinguish between good and bad information. For news organizations who often rely on the strength of their brands to maintain trust in their audience, this study suggests that how people perceive their reporting on social media may have little to do with that brand. A greater presence or role for individual journalists on social networks may help them boost trust in the content they create and share. And for scholars, this research emphasizes the importance of simultaneously studying factors like who shares the story, the source, trust, and engagement. Implicit measures of trust are critical, as people may explicitly report that the source is what drives their trust while their actual evaluations of the article suggest otherwise.

As more people rely on social media for news, understanding how users interpret and share news and information from these sources will become increasingly important. This study points to the sharer of the article rather than the source as the key factor to understanding that dynamic. How news organizations, social media users, and social media networks respond to a news environment where the users themselves determine the credibility of the information in the network will determine how well the public can avoid the pitfalls of misinformation in the future.

Notes

1. To mitigate priming effects, the questions about trust in news sources and public figures were asked near the start of the interview and then nineteen questions about digital advertising were asked before respondents saw the experimental stimuli.
2. ANCOVA analysis confirms that for most demographic characteristics there is little difference between the two manipulation groups for the sharer variable and the source variable. However, African Americans were more likely to be in the trust group for the sharer variable, and older adults were more likely to be in the AP group for the source variable. These differences are controlled for in the multivariate analysis.
3. The analysis excludes 23 respondents due to missing data and 66 respondents that spent less than 10 s looking at the article because it is unlikely they read the story. The analysis was re-run with these 66 cases included, and it did not significantly change the findings or conclusions. The median time people spent reading the page was 63 s, and 75% of respondents spent at least 30 s reviewing the post and article.
4. The analysis also excludes 242 people who received the news from The Associated Press, but said they were either not familiar with it or did not find it trustworthy. These people are excluded so the manipulation compares an unknown source to a source that respondents trust.
5. Since research shows people can struggle to recall details such as the source when getting news (Funt et al. 2016) and people can retain a sense of where a story came from even if they cannot recall it exactly (Graber 1984), the analysis includes both people who could recall the sharer or the source and those who could not recall the sharer or source. The analysis was re-run excluding those who did not later recall the sharer or source, and it did not change the key findings. Moreover, those who could not explicitly recall the name of the sharer had earlier reported either a favorable or unfavorable impression of that person.
6. Restricting the analysis to those who find the elite sharer either "Very trustworthy" or "Very untrustworthy" greatly increases the effect of the sharer, Wilks' λ $F(2, 288)=14.89$, $p<0.001$, partial $\eta^2=0.09$, and further reduces the impact of the source, Wilks' λ $F(2, 288)=1.14$, ns, partial $\eta^2=0.01$. In follow-up ANCOVAs, the sharer is significant and the source is not for both trust and engagement. This suggests that the sharer is even more

salient when there is a strong opinion on their trustworthiness, but the main findings show that even an elite sharer viewed as only somewhat trustworthy will still have a significant impact.

7. Among those who were in The Associated Press condition, limiting analysis to only those who said the AP was "Very trustworthy" increases the effect of the source, Wilks' λ $F(2, 680)=10.35$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2=0.03$, but the impact of the sharer remains about the same, Wilks' λ $F(2, 680)=13.47$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2=0.04$. In follow-up ANCOVAs, sharer and source are significant for both trust and engagement. While limiting to those who find the AP very trustworthy does increase the effect of the source, it still has less of an impact than the sharer.

Data availability statement

The data from this article were highlighted in a 2017 Media Insight Project report with a similar title. That report was intended for the public and news publishers, and it used topline survey results to highlight the impact the person sharing a post has on trust in news on social media. This article builds upon that report, and applies advanced statistical analysis, explores potential moderators, and situates the findings within the broader literature.

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Appendix: Full Experimental Screens